Jennifer O'Bryan. "Why Would She Want to Read About Such Horrible Things?": The Appeal of War as a Reading Interest for Girls. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2018. 52 pages. Advisor: Brian W. Sturm

Reading appeal research has historically identified war as a topic of reading interest that correlates strongly with gender. Boys are traditionally much more likely than girls to read books involving war, and many girls prefer to avoid the topic. At the same time, research has consistently found smaller but significant numbers of girls who choose to read in this subject area. Using qualitative analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study explored the appeal factors at play for five 11- and 12-year-old children who identify as girls (four in whole, one in part) who enjoy reading about war.

Traditional reading appeal factors that were sought by these readers included action-packed storylines, an attention-grabbing writing style, fast or intensifying pacing, courageous characters, and a dramatic, suspenseful tone. Learning about historical events played an important role for readers of historical fiction, while fantasy fans were drawn to the presence of strong female characters working alongside males in an adventurous storyline. Gender issues pervaded the discussion, revealing feelings of powerlessness and inequality. Several participants reported benefits that aligned with outcomes associated with bibliotherapy as well as closer connections to men in their lives. The results of this study can support librarians in providing gender-transformative readers' advisory services and assist other researchers in understanding gender dynamics in the middle grade years.

Headings:

Reading interests of girls

Reading interests of middle school students

Reading interests research

Gender differences (Psychology)

War stories

Readers' advisory services

“WHY WOULD SHE WANT TO READ ABOUT SUCH HORRIBLE THINGS?”:

THE APPEAL OF WAR AS A READING INTEREST FOR GIRLS

by
Jennifer O’Bryan

A Master's paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April, 2018

Approved by:

_____
Brian W. Sturm

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Modern youth librarians strive to provide inclusive collections and readers' advisory services that meet the needs of all readers. According to the Library Bill of Rights adopted by the American Library Association (ALA), "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background or views" (ALA, 1996). When readers' advisory for children emphasizes gender, young readers may miss out on satisfying stories and opportunities to explore other points of view. Additionally, harmful stereotypes may be learned or reinforced by gender-based guidance received from librarians or material that perpetuates gender imbalances.

In the early days of public libraries, gendered book recommendations seemed appropriate to librarians steeped in the cultural sensibilities of the time. Boys and girls were being prepared for very different futures: boys as citizens of the world, and girls as keepers of the home. Gendered titles served the dual purpose of providing children with material that was believed to offer strong appeal while providing them with the moral and instructive background they were seen as needing to prepare for happy and successful future lives.

According to the introduction to *The Boy's Percy: Old Ballads of War, Adventure, and Love, from Bishop T. Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry,* the book would prepare boys to be "manful in necessary fight, fair in trade, loyal in love, [and] generous to the poor" (Percy, 1884, pp. xxx-xxxi). Similarly, *Sketches of the Lives of Distinguished*

Females, Written for Girls, with a View to Their Mental and Moral Improvement included commentary on the characters of the women described, so that girls would learn "to appreciate what is exemplary and to condemn what is to be avoided" (American Lady, 1833, xv).

Research into children's reading preferences has traditionally sought to identify what children want to read according to various demographic categories with the goal of improving library services to the youth population. Gender has repeatedly been shown to offer some of the strongest demographic correlations with reading preferences, and these results have been found consistently throughout many years of study. Although these studies have also revealed significant numbers of children—particularly girls—reading across gender boundaries, the focus has traditionally been on meeting the needs of the majority at the expense of the minority.

Increasing gender equality and societal acceptance of gender as a fluid social construct (Posey, 2016), however, has spurred librarians to challenge notions of gender-based readers' advisory. Growing numbers of people, particularly those from younger generations, identify outside of the gender binary (Marsh, 2016), and all students benefit from challenging outdated stereotypes through exposure to narratives that fall outside of conventional gender expectations.

This research was designed to explore the phenomenon of children who identify as girls (in whole or in part) who cross traditional gender boundaries in their reading habits. Readers aged 10-14 are of particular interest because research has shown that gender preferences in reading tend to emerge around age nine (Stauffer, 2007). This age group also maps well with several large-scale reading preference studies performed in the

past 20 years. The qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews is an appropriate method for gaining in-depth insight into children's perspective on the appeal of books that counter traditional gender expectations, seeking to answer the following question:

> War as a reading interest is most commonly associated with boys, but girls also read this genre. When girls age 10-14 choose books about war for pleasure reading, what is it about these stories that appeals to them?

With librarians increasingly working to provide more inclusive readers' advisory that supports young patrons of all gender identities and expressions, exploratory research that examines at the factors at play when young readers engage in reading that runs counter to traditional gender stereotypes becomes critically important. Better information about the interests and desires of non-traditional readers will support librarians when making decisions about the guidance they provide to young patrons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Librarians have written about the relationship between gender and reading, particularly as it concerns children, since at least the late 19th century. During that period of rapid expansion of the modern public library system, concerns centered on providing citizens with collections that would serve to educate and raise the public consciousness. Light reading, particularly fiction, was seen at best as a "popular but… useless class of literature" (Beardsley, 1882, p. 176). Librarians sought to "make the standard in the selection of books for the public library as high as the community will sustain" (Chamberlain, 1883, p. 210) while acknowledging the demands of their tax-paying community members.

In the area of children's fiction, the opinion of librarians on what constituted quality literature occasionally clashed with that of the general public. Some parents in Victorian America zealously fought to protect their children from books they saw as potentially objectionable, including the type of quality literature that librarians wanted their patrons to read. In 1883, *Library Journal* reprinted a letter to the editor of the *N.Y. Evening Post* in which a parent expressed horror about the reading requirements for Harvard's entrance exams. The editor responded, "A young man who cannot be trusted to read *The Mill on the Floss* or *Othello* should not be sent to any college whatever… but should be kept safe at home" (Hewens, p. 57).

Children, on the other hand, were enthusiastic consumers of books and magazines on the other end of the "quality" spectrum. An 1883 study by J. M. Greenwood looked at the material read by 1,371 boys and 1,506 girls over an eight-month period. Approximately 30 percent of the titles identified were fiction (a much-maligned category at the time), and another 11 percent were categorized as "yellow-back trash":

> Upon inquiry it was found that 432 pupils had read one or more copies of the *Police Gazette*; in other words that one pupil out of every five was either a constant or an occasional reader of this paper. In fifty-seven rooms, pupils were found who read it; in nine rooms, no readers. When questioned, the pupils said they read it because it "had lots of fights and killings in it," and with great unanimity they thought "it ought not to be sold for children to read it" (Greenwood, 1883, p.49).

Some libraries banned or withdrew controversial material altogether—from tabloid papers to light series fiction. A librarian from Vermont reported in 1882 that he had "withdrawn permanently all of Alger, Fosdick, Thomes, and Oliver Optic… The *Police Gazette* and other vile weeklies have been discarded" (Hewins, 1882, p. 187).

This particular librarian was not alone. The same year, ALA surveyed libraries regarding the censorship of popular fiction. Of the 30 libraries that responded, nine had chosen not to admit books written by Fosdick (writing as Harry Castlemon), and two had removed them after a period of circulation. The Oliver Optic (a pseudonym for William Taylor Adams) novels fared only somewhat better. Although only two libraries barred his titles in advance, six removed them after a period of use. Alger's rags-to-riches tales were the most tolerated by librarians, with only three libraries refusing to admit his work at all, and another three libraries removing his novels after having had them in circulation (ALA, 1882, p. 28).

Although many of these stories included strong moral lessons, librarians were concerned about the books being a waste of time at best and a dangerous influence at worst. Newspapers regularly reported stories of "runaway boys who had been fired by yellow colored novels… the boy reads these books on the sly, steals what he can from his parents, and leaves a home to take his chance in the great world" (Hartford Courant, 1883, p. 85). Librarians as well as the general public were concerned about the potential real consequences of sheltered, impressionable children being inspired to action by fictional stories of adventure and unlikely success in the larger world.

Even novels that were not considered dangerous were seen as an "undoubted waste of time and neglect of opportunities" (Cowell, 1877, p. 157). Librarians were not focused on getting children to read, but on getting them to read selectively and in moderation. Some branches experimented with restrictive borrowing limits in an attempt to reduce the total amount of reading of popular material (Providence, 1882, p. 89). The ALA's 1883 *Report on the Reading of the Young* confidently stated, "We are all agreed that children read too much" (p. 227).

Reading material for children was strongly gendered, oriented toward preparing children for their anticipated future roles. The Brookline (Mass.) Public Library published a juvenile catalog in 1908 entitled *Something to Read for Girls and Boys*, providing suggestions for fiction and non-fiction reading broken down by gender. Books for boys included stories of adventure, war, and boys' schools (pp. 7-10). Non-fiction books covered topics such as woodworking, fishing, camping, and athletics. The book *Starting in Life: What Each Calling Has to Offer Ambitious Boys and Men* described jobs including physician, architect, and merchant (p. 12).

Girls' books, on the other hand, encouraged girls to focus on domestic affairs. More telling than the titles were the books' descriptions: "the everyday life of a pleasant family of young people," "pleasant home life in New England in old-fashioned days," and "the story of two English girl friends" (pp. 10-11). Non-fiction topics included cooking, dancing, art, and sewing. The book *Helps for Ambitious Girls* described female-approved occupations such as nurse, housekeeper, and teacher.

Librarians sometimes complained that the number of "boys' books" published outnumbered the "girls' books," making it difficult to balance the collection. An editorial statement from the August 1883 issue of *Library Journal* maintained that there was a need for more stories "telling of the wholesome, sheltered home life of American girls who are carefully brought up, but at the same time have plenty of fun and frolic" (p. 152). Given the scarcity of such titles, girls were often encouraged to read across gender boundaries. As one writer argued, "Boys' books chiefly abound" and "a good boys' book is not a bad book usually for girls to read" (Boston Herald, 1881).

Even among the "girls' books" there was evidence that girls enjoyed pushing gender boundaries. Louise May Alcott's *Little Women*, published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869, enjoyed enormous popularity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jo Marsh, the novel's tomboyish protagonist, enthusiastically read "sensational" fiction and fought against the expectations set for women. Jo described her deceased Uncle Marsh's library as a "wilderness of books, in which she could wander where she liked… a region of bliss" where she "devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures, like a regular bookworm" (Alcott, 60). Jo harbored dreams of serving as a soldier in the Civil War, and she wrote and acted out scenes of violence. When she read

Bunyan's Christian allegory *Pilgrim's Progress*, she remembered the fighting rather than the moral lessons (Aliaga-Buchenau, pp. 80, 84).

Many girls shared Jo's interest in reading about action and combat. A reading preference study performed by James E. Russell in 1896 showed girls to be enthusiastic readers of stories of war (Bullock, 1897, pp. 1015-1018). Four thousand children in Colorado were asked to list the books they had read for pleasure during the past six months, and to mark the topics they most enjoyed from a list that included stories "of adventure, of travel, of great men, of great women, love stories, ghost stories, detective stories, and war stories." An average of 47.3 percent of girls and 81.3 percent of boys in fifth through eighth great named war as a topic of interest. The study also found evidence of gender bias against women. While 54.3 percent of boys in that age group enjoyed reading stories of great men, only 16 percent of boys enjoyed reading about women. Girls, on the other hand, showed equal interest in stories of great men and women, with an average of 47.5 percent reporting that they enjoyed reading about men, and 46.8 percent about women.

A 1907 study by Franklin O. Smith (pp. 209, 215-216) again showed girls reading against gender stereotype in significant numbers. He asked 670 boys and 885 girls in grades 6 through 8 to list their ten favorite books. From those lists, the responses of 385 boys and 573 girls were selected at random. Books from S. Bracebridge Hemyng's series of "penny dreadfuls" featuring the orphan Jack Harkaway were named an overwhelming 393 times by girls and only 31 times by boys. These books had been classified by librarians for years as a particularly concerning series of books for boys from the category of dime novels "given to detailing the daring deeds of courageous and

magnanimous cutthroats" (Brett, 1885, p. 128). Robert Louis Stevenson's violent and action-packed *Treasure Island* was favored by 90 girls compared with 45 boys. The works of G. A. Henty, many of which directly involve war, were named 11 times by girls and 56 times by boys.

During and after World War I, juvenile series books about war were sometimes specifically written with girls in mind. In 1918, the Stratemeyer Syndicate published a three-book story arc in the *Ruth Fielding* series in which Ruth joined the Red Cross to support the war in France (Ruth Fielding Series, 2017). The *Grace Harlowe Overseas* series, published in 1920, followed the main character and her friends in Europe as they participated in the war effort (Grace Harlowe, 2017).

In 1926, Arthur Melville Jordan evaluated the reading interests of children using two different methods. In the first, eight libraries in and around New York City were examined. Popular juvenile books in active circulation were given a score that accounted for the number of copies owned by the library, the number that had been worn out from overuse, and the number available on the shelves. The scores were triangulated through observation performed over a period of one to three weeks per library (pp. 14-17).

Jordan concluded that war was a particularly popular topic among boys based on the popularity of books by Altsheler and Henty (pp. 20-22). Unfortunately, he did not consider whether girls' reading might have contributed to the popularity of these books, and he did not discuss the extent to which girls were seen checking these books out during the observation visits.

Further, Jordan stated that "girls and boys read, almost entirely, different books… it is difficult to imagine a strong, healthy American boy of twelve years reading *Little*

Women, and almost as difficult to imagine his sister of the same age reading an Altsheler," although he admitted that "the latter does happen at times" (p. 24). He asserted that girls were interested in reading about home, school, fairy stories, and love stories. He attributed the immense popularity of Alcott's *Little Women* entirely to a female desire "to nurse, to care for and fuss over others, to relieve, comfort, and console," saying "not only is the mother in *Little Women* willing to give up her breakfast, but even the young and at times thoughtless daughters comprehend that it would also give them pleasure to give up their breakfast" (p. 98).

May Lazar (1937) had very different ideas about the motivations behind girls' reading of traditionally feminine material. She felt that girls tended to read what "social opinion has prescribed them" and that "they like [these books] because they do not know any other kind" (p. 92). Lazar's 1931-1932 study (part of a larger study of student progress) examined the reading interests of New York City students based on gender and intelligence ("bright" students had a Stanford-Binet IQ over 110, "average" students scored in the 90 to 110 range, and "dull" students scored from 80 to 90). Ninety-seven percent of students in this study were aged 10-12 (pp. 4-9).

Children were asked to check boxes next to the kinds of books they liked best from a list of twelve categories, with two checks for their very favorite category (p. 53). They were also asked to name four or five books read in the last year (p. 69).

Many of the books listed, including the war-related books, were series books that fell under the "adventure" category. Adventure was the second most-popular category among boys and the third most-popular category among girls, with 22.1 percent and 14.1 percent respectively reporting it as their favorite (p. 55). Reasons children gave for why

they liked adventure books included "war is exciting" and "lots of shooting and fighting" (p. 86). Among both girls and boys, appreciation for adventure books correlated positively with IQ (p. 56).

Girls were frequently found to read boys' series books, while boys generally did not read series written for girls (p. 85). Lazar commented that "the results of this study show that if there are distinct differences in standards for the sexes, the girls by no means stayed within the boundaries, whatever they may be" and "bright girls 'overstepped the boundaries' to a greater extent than average or dull girls" (p.92).

Another study that examined children's reading interests by both gender and IQ level was performed by Robert L. Thorndike in 1939. In an effort to control for complicating factors and measure genuine reading interest, the study used an annotated list of imaginary book titles rather than real books. As a further control on validity, "catch" titles were included such as *Famous Sermons by Famous Preachers*, *Brush Your Teeth*, and *History of the Dutch Republic*. Questionnaires were excluded when a child expressed interest in a majority of the trap questions (1941, pp. 7-10).

The annotated title list was designed to gauge interest in various reading topics. For example, the title *Lonesome Laddy Finds a Friend*, described as "how a stray dog found a new master and showed his true love," was intended to measure interest in realistic animal stories. Children were asked to circle "yes," "?," or "no" to indicate whether they were interested in reading each story (p. 8). Interest scores were assigned to titles based on the number of yes responses plus one half of the number of "?" responses divided by the total number of answers received (p. 15).

A total of 2,891 acceptable questionnaires were received from students in grades 4 through 12, with 86 percent of responses coming from children in grades 4 through 8 (p. 11). "War" was the name of a non-fiction topic category that included the titles *Must America Fight?* and *Japan Loses the War* (p. 33). Fictional books about war were included in the "stories of adult adventure" category, with titles such as *Pilot Peters on Patrol*, *The Revenge of Pahonkas*, and *Fortunes of War* (p. 28).

Boys showed a stronger level of interest than girls in reading books from both the war and adult adventure categories, with scores in the moderately high (65 to 79 percent) to high (80 percent or greater) range. The majority of girls, however, wanted to read stories from both of these categories as well. Interest scores for girls ranged from moderate (50 percent to 64 percent) to moderately high for both topics (pp. 24, 28, 33).

A 1950 study by Pearl S. McCarty looked at circulation records for books borrowed during the 1947-1948 school year by 4,814 Florida students in grades 7 to 12. The circulation records were randomly sampled from schools that kept these statistics and included both assigned and independent reading (p. 90). "War and defense stories" were found to have the second-strongest gender correlation, just behind "hobbies-sports," but the topic was not a particularly popular category for either gender group. Only 6.1 percent of books read by boys and 1.2 percent of those read by girls fell into the category of "war and defense" (pp. 92-94).

George W. Norvell took a different approach in a large-scale study of children's reading interests that spanned a 40-year period starting in the 1930s (1973, p.12). Teachers gathered the opinions of students in grades 7 through 12 about poems and prose that had been read both in class and independently, using the scale "very interesting,"

"fairly interesting," and "uninteresting." Each title was assigned an interest score equal to the number of "very interesting" responses plus one half of the number of "fairly interesting" responses divided by the total number of responses (pp. 10-13). Over the course of the study, 4,993 selections were evaluated, with an average of 828 responses received per title (p. 21).

The report states that while girls enjoyed "lively" action, they found "violent or bloody action" to be an unfavorable characteristic. Boys were seen to be interested in both "lively" and "violent" action. Jack London's "All Gold Canyon" (interest score of 83.2 for boys and 73.1 for girls) and Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" (interest score of 93.3 for boys and 81.2 for girls) were identified as good examples of this pattern.

Norvell's conclusion that girls avoid violence in their reading has often been repeated in the literature (Tibbetts, 1974, p. 107; Belloni & Jongsma, 1978, p. 280; Stauffer, 2007, p. 410). The titles mentioned, however, show a rather strong level of interest among girls (despite a difference in the strength of the appeal). By comparison, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* showed a far lower level of appeal among all children, earning an interest score of 51.1 among boys and 62.4 among girls, and Edgar Allen Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" scored only 56.4 for boys and 55.0 for girls (pp. 84, 181, 217, 383).

Better evidence that many girls prefer not to read about war and violence was found by L. F. Ashley in 1970. Students in grades 4 through 7 were asked to rank the topics they liked reading about as well as the topics they disliked reading about, pulling from a standardized list of 40 options (p. 1089).

War was the fourteenth most-popular topic overall, with 13.6 percent (123 children out of 900) identifying it as a "like." When grouped by grade and gender, the highest number of positive responses for war was received by fifth grade boys (36.9 percent of 130) (p. 1090). On the other hand, war was in fourth place as the most-frequently identified "dislike," with 403 negative responses (44.7 percent of all children). Sixth-grade girls were the group with the most "dislike" responses, with 83.2 percent identifying it as a disliked topic (p. 1091). An average of 71 percent of all girls surveyed identified war as a "dislike," compared with only 17 percent of boys. Despite this large gender difference, a small but significant number of girls enjoyed reading about war, with 5.3 percent of all girls ranking war as either a first, second, or third choice topic (pp. 1089-1094).

A large-scale study of children's pleasure-reading habits performed by Christine Hall and Martin Coles in 1994 showed similar patterns of interest among boys and girls. Surveys were administered to a stratified random sample of approximately 8,000 children in England aged 10 to 14, with semi-structured interviews performed to follow-up and expand upon responses for 1 percent of the sample population (pp. 163-168). As part of the questionnaire, children were asked to list all books read for pleasure within the prior four weeks. Researchers grouped the titles into content-based categories for analysis (p. 4). The total number of readers of "war/spy-related" books was relatively small, with only 4.6 percent of boys and 1.7 percent of girls reporting having read such a book in the past month. It was a category, however, that correlated strongly with gender, second only to "sports-related" books. Boys represented 74.1 percent of readers of war and spy books, and girls represented 25.9 percent (p. 75).

A similarly large reading preference study was completed in 2005 by Christina Clark and Amelia Foster, although this research simply asked students about their preferred reading topics rather than examining specific titles read. Designed for consistency with prior reading preference research, the study used the same topic groups as Coles and Hall. Out of 8,000 British students aged 5 to 17 who were surveyed, 47.5 percent of boys reported that they enjoy reading "war/spy-related" fiction compared with 18.7 percent of girls (Clark & Foster, 2005, p. 35).

Although findings have varied in intensity through the years, the research has consistently shown that war is one of the reading topics that correlates most strongly with gender. Boys are much more likely to choose to read war stories, particularly those with violent action, and many girls choose to avoid the topic. At the same time, these studies have repeatedly found significant numbers of girls who choose to read in this subject area. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to explore the appeal factors at play for this group of girls who enjoy reading a topic that has traditionally been associated with male readers.

This research will generate information that supports an understanding of reading appeal for children whose interests cross traditional gender boundaries. Ultimately, the results of this study can inform gender-transformative readers' advisory and collections development policies that promote equity and challenge gender stereotypes while supporting children in their reading interests.

METHODS

This study was designed to explore the appeal of books about war among middle grade girls who choose to read these stories for pleasure. In addition to being a broad examination of the experience of these readers, this research sought to identify whether the reasons for reading these books aligned with traditional readers' advisory appeal factors and the extent to which mood and other personal factors played a role. The primary goal of this study was to improve readers' advisory for middle grade readers, particularly girls who cross traditional gender boundaries in their pleasure reading.

Since no published research was identified that investigated the appeal of war books among females aged 10-14, it was appropriate to approach this project as a descriptive exploratory study using qualitative research methods (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 27). Both focus groups and interviews were considered for this project. Focus groups offered the advantage of social interaction that could prompt participants to discuss aspects of appeal they may not have considered on their own. Additionally, some middle graders are more comfortable with group interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pp. 193-4). Ultimately, however, individual interviews were selected for the depth of personal details they could provide. According to Kvale (2007, p. 46), interviews are an ideal choice for "describing (people's) experiences… and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world."

Special precautions were taken to ensure the protection of the minor participants in this study. Recruitment was designed to avoid any unintended sense of coercion and "promote the young person's autonomous choice" (Mooney, 2014). Informed consent documents were provided to parents of interested children with instructions to review and approve the documents privately prior making a decision about their child's participation. Children were only presented with study documents for review and signature once parents have approved the paperwork. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the interview process was explained to the participant both with and without a parent present in order to confirm that they understood the process and were aware that they could request to stop at any time.

Additionally, consideration was given to creating an interview setting that would reduce the impact of the power differential between researcher and research subject. Participants were offered a choice of conducting the interview face-to-face or side-by-side. Giving the research subjects the chance to choose the seating arrangement offered them a sense of control as well as the chance to maximize their personal comfort during the interview. Pencil and paper were available for those who would be more comfortable doodling or drawing during the conversation.

Interview questions were designed according to best practices for conducting research with middle grade youth. Prepared questions were written to be short and succinct, inquiring about a single idea at a time. Care was taken to avoid leading questions to which children may be particularly likely to respond with inaccurate information. Additionally, the interviewer communicated both directly and indirectly that

there were no wrong answers to questions (Kvale, 2007, pp. 69-70). The interview guide is attached as Appendix B.

Only those attributes considered relevant to the study were collected, including age at time of interview, racial and ethnic background, and geography (urban vs. rural). Digital voice recordings did not include names or other identifying information, with the exception of the speaker's voice.

Recruitment for this study was performed using emails to parents of demographically diverse groups of middle grade girls in conjunction with snowball recruitment from known subjects (see Appendix A for recruitment text). Snowball sampling was considered appropriate for this study primarily due to its advantages in identifying this population; middle grade girls are likely to be familiar with the true reading interests of their peers. Since this is an exploratory study based on an in-depth analysis of a small research sample, issues related to non-random selection are less relevant.

Prospective participants qualified for this study if they were between the ages of 10 to 14 and self-identified as girls (in whole or in part) who enjoy reading about war. Five interviews were arranged with children who met these criteria. Three children preferred to read about fictional wars in the fantasy genre, while the other two preferred historical fiction. All participants had read both types of books, and Claire had read widely in both categories. Four of the children identified as female, and one identified outside the gender binary. Demographic characteristics of each participant are given in Table 1. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants and approved by parents in order to

provide an accurate reflection of self-identity while maintaining privacy (Lahman et al., 2015, pp. 446-449).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

Pseudonym	Reading Preference	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Melody	Historical fiction	12	Female	Black White Hispanic
Claire	Fantasy	11	Female	White
Billy Bob Joe	Historical fiction	12	Non-binary ("Both")	Black White
Jane	Fantasy	11	Female	White
Elle	Fantasy	11	Female	White

Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes in length and were recorded as digital audio. The interviews were designed in a semi-structured format in order to ensure that each interview covered all of the key topics of research interest while also providing flexibility to pursue specific areas of interest with each participant (Kvale, 2007, p. 57). The structured questions were designed to solicit general responses for each of the appeal factors established by Joyce Saricks (2005, pp. 45-66) as well as personal factors known to influence reading selection (Ooi & Liew, 2011, pp. 756-71). These key areas of interest were established in advance of the interview in order to provide a framework against which to compare and evaluate responses during the analysis phase (Kvale, 2007, p. 49).

Interviews were conducted at the public library at which each child was a patron. This setting was chosen to allow for easy access to books that the children may wish to discuss, and to provide a comfortable, natural location for a discussion of reading appeal factors. The specific interview location within the library was selected by each child and approved by the parent, with the requirement that the researcher and child be within view

of the parent at all times. The child was given the option of whether or not to have the parent within earshot of the interview.

At the outset of each interview, both the parent and the participating child were reminded of the research question, the types of data collected, and fact that audio from the interview would be recorded and direct quotes would be used in the paper. Additionally, they were given an overview of the security procedures in place to protect the confidentiality of the data. It was explained that the interview could take place in any location in the library that felt comfortable to both the parent and child, provided that a door would be left open if a private room was used. Additionally, it was explained that at least part of the interview would likely be conducted in the juvenile stacks of the library in order to look at and discuss books on the shelves. After soliciting and answering any additional questions, the parent was asked to leave the room so that the interview could begin.

After the parent left the room, the child was asked once more whether she had any other questions about the interview process. When it was clear that the participant was ready to begin, the recorder was turned on. An introductory question asking the subject about the first book she ever read about war was used to establish trust and gain an overall sense of the subject's perspective on the topic. The question was designed to maximize the interviewee's comfort; being given a specific memory to discuss at the outset of the interview would give her a strong point of reference from which to speak. According to Kvale (2007, p. 55), the first minutes of an interview are critical, and rapport can best be achieved through "attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding and respect for what the subject says."

Once the subject seemed comfortable with the interview process, the first round of thematic questioning began. In this segment of the interview, subjects were specifically asked about their enthusiasm for reading books about war using questions that aligned with the research goals of this study (Galletta, 2013). As the participants responded to each question, follow-up questions were used to encourage elaboration, clarify interesting language choices, or investigate areas of strong emotion (Kvale, 2017, pp. 60-61). Additionally, mental notes were made of topics that would benefit from further investigation.

Thematic content analysis of transcripts was performed manually, with a focus on capturing latent as well as manifest content. The digital files for each interview were transcribed using pseudonyms for confidentiality.

In the first round of coding, general notes and themes were applied to phrases. The 2017 edition of *The Secret Language of Books*, NoveList's guide to reading appeal factors, was used as a controlled vocabulary where appropriate. The NoveList terms were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of reading appeal factors established by "Joyce Saricks, Nancy Pearl, Neal Wyatt, and others" (NoveList, 2017, para. 4).

Once initial coding was complete, the code list was reviewed and related codes were collapsed into a shorter list of themes (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Through repeated passes of the data, various possibilities for code groupings were evaluated to examine alternate themes and interpretations that emerged from the data. Time was taken to reflect on the shorter coding list to determine whether even more basic patterns existed (Galleta, 2013), until four basic groupings emerged from the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional reading appeal factors accounted for only part of what participants expressed about why they enjoyed reading about war. In addition to story-based factors such as storyline, writing style, pacing, characterization, and tone, the following thematic areas emerged from the interviews: war as a subject, negotiating gender issues, and growth and connection.

Traditional Reading Appeal Factors

> I like it because when they're fighting it's really intense and I really hate it when someone interrupts. Because you're reading and somebody's like, "Hey, blah blah blah" and I'm like, "*Shut up*. I'm reading" (Elle).

Storyline

Action-packed storylines were found to be a primary appeal factor for all participants in the study. They described favorite scenes involving narrow escapes, daring rescues, and defending the world against monsters. For these readers, knowing that a book involved war was a promise of a certain type of story. "It just seems there's more action," said Jane. Claire felt the same way, saying that these books "have action and they're more powerful storylines."

Participants recognized, however, that they did not want combat on every page. Most agreed that there should be a balance between page-turning action and calmer scenes, although the consensus leaned toward the action side of the spectrum. All readers

were interested in the internal state of the protagonist as well as external events, "so they're thinking while they're having action and stuff happen" (Claire).

Opinions were split as far as whether they preferred stories that focused on people as opposed to situations and historical events. Billy Bob Joe liked books that involved "protecting people," while Jane was more interested in "the action unfolding." The others were looking for a balance. For Claire, it was a matter of mood:

> If they're fighting, you have more action if you feel like you're in more of an action-y mood. But if you're feeling kind of lazy or something and you want to read a book about someone who isn't doing all this stuff, that's kind of a thing you can do. There's still action, but it's not as heavy.

As far as story structure, no particular pattern could be discerned. Readers described scenes that took place across the storyline, from inciting incident to plot development, climax, and denouement. Several readers mentioned, however, that they enjoy a good cliffhanger that would "drive you insane thinking," something they felt was "a good thing every now and then" (Claire).

Writing Style

Similar to action-packed storylines, readers expressed enthusiasm for an attention-grabbing writing style. Jane said that she found it "hard to focus on things when I know I can just read my book." Melody described internal conversations she has with herself when she knows she has an unfinished book to read:

> It just keeps reminding me, "You need to finish the book!" *"Sorry. I'll finish it later. You know that."* "You need to finish the book!" I'm like, *"I'll get to it, I'll get to it. Calm down."* It's just like, "You didn't finish the book!!!" I'm like, *"OK, OK, I'll read it. Jeez."*

All of the fantasy readers had read the ten Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan, which feature the fictional Titan Wars and reference alternate history versions of various

historical conflicts. Claire said that her favorite books were always "attention-grabbing" and that "you can't close the book because they just hook you instantly." She felt that Riordan was a master of that writing style. "The best part about his books is that you can almost put yourself into them and act like you were there: 'I saw that. Totally!'"

Readers found attention-grabbing elements in less action-oriented books as well. Several participants mentioned reading books where direct fighting was minimal or absent, such as *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (Melody, Claire, Billy Bob Joe), *Yellow Star* by Jennifer Rozines Roy (Melody, Claire, Elle), and *Refugee* by Alan Gratz (Melody, Billy Bob Joe). Although these books featured less direct action, the readers still described being drawn into these stories and unable to put them down.

Pacing

The study participants expressed an interest in books that were either fast-paced from the outset (Melody, Claire) or intensifying, starting slowly and building momentum throughout the book (Billy Bob Joe, Jane, Elle). Claire complained that J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* took too long to get to the action while Billy Bob Joe said, "I opened this one book and there was like a war scene happening on the first page already and I was like, 'Nope! No!!'" None of the participants, however, were looking for a leisurely-paced book.

Most readers preferred dialogue to description, and some (Claire, Jane) admitted to skipping over parts they found boring:

> When they're describing something and it's taking forever, I normally just skip down a few lines… If they're just describing this huge ugly monster I'm like, OK, I got the point. I don't need 17 sentences about it (Claire).

The historical fiction and fantasy novels the participants enjoy, however, tend to contain more description than other genres due to the amount of world-building required to bring the setting to life. Their general enthusiasm for books about war points to a greater tolerance for description than other young readers might have. Billy Bob Joe spoke about a favorite scene in which descriptive writing seemed to dominate:

> They were describing this one war, this one big piece of the war that was happening with bombs dropping and it was like a scene but it was played in slow motion and you could tell kind of everything that was going on. It was cool.

Characterization

When asked what kinds of characters they like to read about, all participants provided some variation of the word "courageous." They also looked for characters who were good fighters* (Melody, Claire), smart* (Claire, Billy Bob Joe, Jane), funny* (Claire, Jane), relatable (Claire, Billy Bob Joe), and strong females (Claire, Elle). Qualities that received a single mention included awkward, believable, happy,* likeable, LGBTQIA diverse, resilient, sassy, spirited, spunky, and sympathetic.

Claire and Elle both liked characters with physical characteristics similar to their own, and Melody mentioned that she particularly liked one book because she shared a common ethnicity with the protagonist. All readers said they were interested in reading diverse characters from different backgrounds because, as Jane put it, "it's sort of learning something new, but also reading a good book."

All participants were open to reading protagonists of any gender, although Billy Bob Joe (who prefers the pronouns they/them/theirs) said they would not read a story featuring "bubbly pink princesses." Elle explained that stories involving war tended to

---

* Not a NoveList term

feature male protagonists: “Most of the main characters I read about are boys, but that’s just because of the books.” Participants were split as to whether they tended to imagine themselves as the main character, but those who did (Claire, Elle) said that they identified with protagonists regardless of gender.

Readers felt strongly about the age of the protagonist, saying that “your age gives you a different take on things” (Claire). All readers were interested in characters aged 12 to 16. Most were willing to read characters as young as 8 years old and as old as 18, depending on the character. Billy Bob Joe was willing to read up to age 29—they were the only participant who reported seeking out books from the YA and adult sections—but was not interested in reading younger characters:

> “If [a protagonist] is older than how old I am it’s fine, but if they’re younger than me, I don’t know. I just can’t read those kinds of books. It just annoys me, the decisions sometimes little kids make. Like when they’re your age, you’re like, “I understand why you would do that.” When they’re younger, you’re like, “*How?* Why would you do that?”

Both of the historical fiction readers and one of the fantasy readers (Melody, Billy Bob Joe, Elle) identified characters as being more important than the storyline. As Melody explained, “Good characters can make an OK story pretty good.” The others felt that a strong storyline was more important, but both acknowledged that only certain types of characters would work in the stories they like to read. “Someone who’s a really good fighter and smart versus someone who doesn’t have a clue what they’re doing, that would be a big difference in the story” (Claire).

Point of view shifts between multiple characters played a role in appeal as well. Claire said that she preferred books written this way “because you get other people’s take on it” and “it’s kind of like I have multiple stories in one book.” Saricks points out that

even though "readers may need to concentrate more to follow the threads and see how they ultimately intertwine," these techniques can "speed the flow because readers want to know what is happening, especially if one chapter ends as a cliffhanger and then the next chapter features another character or plotline" (2005, pp. 47-48).

For these readers, both the cliffhanger endings and multiple storylines seemed to play a role in their enthusiasm for this type of book. As Billy Bob Joe described one book with multiple storylines,

> Some of it was kind of a pain because you were like "What? You're going to end at that point? [sound of frustration]." And sometimes it's kind of nice in a way because it kind of teaches you, "Don't just focus on one thing. Focus on everything else. It's kind of nice, because at the end you realize it just goes [sound and hand gestures showing everything meshing together]."

Frame and Tone

As defined by Saricks, a story's frame refers to its "setting, atmosphere, background, and tone" (2005, pp. 58-59). The genres read by the study participants were the primary determining factor for most of these elements: historical fiction and fantasy are bound by form to setting and background.

One of the questions Saricks uses to identify the importance of frame to a novel is, "Could the book take place elsewhere without altering its effect on readers?" (2005, p. 60). The stories described by participants could not have been dropped in to a different setting, whether they took place in Nazi Germany or the alternate world of Percy Jackson.

The primary tone characteristics sought by the study participants were "dramatic" and "suspenseful." These readers were looking for big stories that kept them turning pages throughout the book, describing scenes such as a fighter pilot being shot down over enemy territory, a family raided by Nazi soldiers, and high-stakes battles against hordes

of monsters. Both historical fiction readers discussed the emotional intensity of the books they read, stories that included intense suffering and the deaths of major characters.

War as a Subject

> "The whole Nazi thing just kind of fascinates me. I don't know. I'm just kind of drawn to it. It's just like, it's not describable. There's no way I could say just like, "Oh, yeah, it's because of this." I just kind of, I don't know. I just like it" (Melody).

Learning About Historical Events

Enthusiasm for learning about history was a common element of several interviews. Participants mentioned reading about World War II (Melody, Claire, Billy Bob Joe, Elle), the American Revolution (Claire, Elle), the American Civil War (Claire, Jane), and the current Syrian civil war (Melody, Billy Bob Joe). As Billy Bob Joe explained, reading about war "kind of tells you what your country did before you came along."

Readers generally spoke about war in negative terms, using words like "nasty," "awful," "horrible," and "scary," but several of them mentioned that there were circumstances in which war would be justified. Jane suggested that "sometimes wars are for good things like to end slavery." Billy Bob Joe felt strongly about genocide:

> It just doesn't seem right for the half of it… If it was like the Nazis and the Jews, for instance, that was one war that I agree on a lot… If it's just a war because of this one stupid bomb or something that's happening, you know, that's not really that big of a thing. But if this one country keeps killing a bunch of people then, yeah, we probably should go over there and kill some people. Not kill some people, but like we should go and fight back basically, because it's kind of messed up.

Claire thought that a war for freedom was justifiable, but recognized that it could be a complex situation:

> If it's a war for freedom like the Revolutionary War then yeah, I mean, it's for a good cause, there's not too simple of an answer besides just let them go, they want to be free. But of course, they wanted the taxes and they weren't getting the taxes and the funding that they needed for something. But we always learned that the Americans were better because we're in America but we don't listen to what England might have been thinking at the time and we need to have an open mind about that kind of thing. Like we can't just think of, "We want it this way. It should be this way." Think of what they're trying to say and that might lead to a lot less wars.

Melody also talked about complexities in war, including ethnic tensions. She said that the Irish people "apparently hated" the British people but were working with them during the war. She also spoke about how different groups of people were treated differently at the Nazi concentration camps:

> It wasn't just the Jewish people that the Germans were taking, it was like the Russians or something too, there were other people. So they were labeled differently, and they would go through and some groups would get better food than others. Like some groups would get thick food and pudding or something. Like rice pudding. And then other groups got thin food that doesn't help anyone.

Fiction and Non-Fiction

Some of the readers made a distinction between historical fiction in which the characters were entirely fictional and books that portrayed real people. Elle, for example, said that she avoids biographical fiction, biography, and non-fiction entirely because "war is scary… so many people get hurt." She prefers to read about fictional wars, and she will only read historical fiction if she knows that the book is not based on a true story.

Claire preferred historical fiction to biographical works for the same reason, saying, "You don't have to worry about [the protagonist], you know, dying." She felt that historical fiction was close enough to the real thing, describing it as "realistic fiction… a real event, but fake characters obviously, and you feel as if it's a real person… like an autobiography."

Although Claire liked historical fiction, she felt that it tended to focus on the characters and did not usually provide enough background about how the war came to pass. “You’re wondering what’s happening the entire time then in the middle or at the end they get it all resolved and [that’s when] you realize what’s happening,” she said. Both Claire and Elle said that they liked books featuring entirely fictional wars the best because those books tended to provide the full story of the events leading up to the war.

Age-Appropriateness of Material

Most participants thought that children needed to reach a certain age or maturity level before they would be ready to read these books, but they varied on the criteria they would use in determining readiness.

Claire felt that readiness to read war books was related to whether or not the child had experienced difficulty or loss:

> It depends on the kind of kid it is... If they’re more kind of happy, thinking nothing bad could ever happen then they might not want to read it. But me, I started getting interested in that about 9, 10. Of course, I was a child of divorce and I’m used to not thinking everything is good in the world.

Billy Bob Joe was concerned about the graphic content of the books, and argued that the decision would be contingent on both the specific book and the child reading it:

> It depends on if it’s really gory or if it’s not so gory… If they have a strong stomach for that kind of stuff, maybe around 8, but I don’t think any younger than that. Unless they have this big strong interest in it, and their stomach, you know, they won’t throw up during it. Because some of the stuff is pretty kind of gruesome, so that’s why I’m saying 8 or maybe 9.

The main criteria for Melody was maturity level, which she felt correlated primarily with gender. She said that most girls would be ready to read any of these books in fifth grade, but that most boys “wouldn’t really react the same [way]” to the serious subject matter and deaths of major characters, even in sixth grade:

> I just see boys as being like, "Well, that's too bad. Oh well." But it depends on who reads it. Because if [boy] or [other boy] read it, that's pretty much what they'd do. But if people like… I'm trying to think of a boy who's mature… eh, [boy], if he read it, he *might* understand better than most boys. Or like all boys at our school.

Negotiating Gender Issues

> Boys can read [girl books] if they want to. Just it would just sort of be… uh, what's the word to use? It wouldn't be weird, but it would just be like… it'd be fine, but like, it's just sort of strange (Jane).

Gendered Books

When participants were asked whether they thought there was such a thing as "boy books" and "girl books," their answers ranged from firm denial to tentative acknowledgement:

> "Nah. Heck nah. There's no such thing" (Melody).
> "No" (Billy Bob Joe).
> "No. Well, maybe?" (Jane).
> "Kind of" (Elle).
> "In some ways" (Claire).

Even those who refuted the existence of gendered books, however, were quick to point out that other people did make such a distinction. Melody said that the boys at her school would say that girls should read "princess stuff." Billy Bob Joe, although claiming that girl books did not exist, also did not want to read them—in part because they were "really girly":

> I feel like whenever people say "This is a girl book, this is for girls," it's usually about ponies and princesses and the kind of ones I kind of flinch away from because it's just kind of like really girly and bright and pink and (uhhh)."

Additional evidence of the pervasiveness of this cultural tendency toward gender stereotypes came when Billy Bob Joe used the phrase "boy jokes" when describing what people meant when they talked about boy books:

> [Boy books] are more those books that have a boy as the main character, like the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books. Most people say that's a boy book. Because it has a focus on a boy and it has a bunch of boy jokes in it.

Most participants argued that people should be able to read whatever they want, but they recognized that it was often considered socially unacceptable to cross gender boundaries. Jane thought that kids at her school would be made fun of for reading across gender boundaries in either direction. Melody agreed, although she recognized that "it's not very rare for a girl to like a boy thing, but it's very rare that you see a boy picking up a princess book." She described why she thought this happened, and referenced a short video made by a teen social media star as an example of this behavior:

> Girls are more open and free and don't care what other people think. And boys are just kind of like, "Oooh, I've got to be in with the cool kids or else no one's going to like me." … Quensadilla made a Vine and it said, "Fourth grade guy conversations: 'Hey, you want to come over to my house and play video games?' 'Sorry, I gotta vape. Which is like rad.'" They were like joking, but yeah… They're not actually going home and doing that kind of stuff. They're just talking about it. But she's accurate, you know.

Other participants felt that boys experienced more external pressure that would prevent them from crossing gender boundaries than girls did, although none of them offered a hypothesis for why this would be the case. Billy Bob Joe explained it this way:

> Mainly society doesn't mind if a girl is reading a boy book, but if a boy picks up a book that's slightly pink or if it has ponies and they pick it up they'd be like, "Oh, that's a girl book!" and it's like this big deal. So basically, it's kind of like this one thing that's really big. Society doesn't care if a girl reads a guy thing or does guy things, but if a guy does it with girl stuff it's suddenly this giant thing.

Elle was the only participant who did not describe any social pressures in reading against gender stereotype. For her, it was simply a matter of reading preferences. She recognized that her reading interests ran counter to those that traditionally appealed to

girls, giving an example of a friend who "likes more romantic stuff" while she thinks "it's kinda *eww*." She went on to explain:

> Most boys at school read stuff about sports and basketball and football and I would never do that. It's definitely not my interest. I don't like football or basketball or stuff like that… Like there isn't really boys or girl books. It's kind of like mostly girls read that, mostly boys read that.

Feelings of Powerlessness

Participants were generally not interested in reading traditionally girl-oriented books, and cultural bias against females seemed to play a role:

> I feel like the boy books are normally better because they're more interesting topics. To me, at least. And they're not all like, "Girls have power, too!" They don't really care about that. And that's why I like them. Because they're just simple, straight to the point. They're stories. They shouldn't have to be "for girls" or "for boys." They're just classified that way (Claire).

The "girls have power, too" messaging that Claire was picking up on implies that power is something girls lack. She went on to say that "the books that some of my friends read are kind of just like all-girl soccer team, all-girl this, all-girl that," as if girls could only "have power" in the absence of boys. "Girl books"–even those intended to affirm–can contribute to a feeling of powerlessness.

According to Shauna Pomerantz, co-author of *Smart Girls: Success, School and the Myth of Post-Feminism*, "Girls are told that everything is equal and that they are maybe even ahead of the boys… But the reality is that they're facing all of these elements of gender inequality all the time" (Krischer, 2017). Melody told a story in which a boy exercised male dominance:

> In fifth grade, I was standing by the door to go to recess and [boy] was getting in my personal bubble. I'm like, "Dude. Personal bubble." And he goes, "Dude? Girls don't call boys 'dude.'" That was a moment where I just wanted to be, like, *bam*. Right in the face. Just like, "What are you saying? Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth? They make absolutely no sense."

Although Melody fantasized about confronting the boy both physically and verbally, she admitted upon probing that she had not in fact made any response at the time.

Power and Equality in Books

In fantasy novels, participants were able to find some powerful female characters and a sense of equality that was often lacking in real life. Elle described a female character from Percy Jackson this way: "Annabeth is a daughter of Athena. Athena is the Greek goddess of wisdom and battle strategy, so people know that if they mess with her, she'll cut off their head."

In her book *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture* (2002), Susan Hopkins discusses how "the action girl character is emerging as a new pop cliché, an empowered sex object who—literally—'kicks butt'" (p. 109). Hopkins argues that although some issues exist with this characterization (such as raising the bar for the feminine ideal and buying into masculine values), the female action hero representation is an overall positive step for women. Hopkins says that girls "are fighting back—not just against male violence but also against restrictive stereotypes of feminine passivity" and that it offers the message that "girls, too, can overcome the odds—girls too can be heroic" (pp. 150-151)

These books not only include strong female characters, they also show them working as equals alongside male characters: "With Percy Jackson, it's a team of boys and girls. There's pretty much an even number, but there's one more boy. There's seven main characters. Which is why there's one extra boy" (Claire). Representation such as this provides readers with a model of gender equality in a shared "sphere of action,"

portraying an environment that counters traditionally-held ideas of gender complementarity in which men and women work within separate arenas (Safdar & Kosakowska-Berezecka, 2015).

Growth and Connection

> With real life it's a continuous thing. It's an everyday kind of battle. But in a book if you want to stop reading, you can. But in life you can't just stop. You kind of have to keep fighting through it. And reading about that can help you with it. Thinking like, "These people go through this every day. And that means I should be able to do this a few days (Claire).

The Healing Power of Narrative

For many of these participants, books about war seemed to serve a salutary purpose that aligned with the goals of bibliotherapy. According to Brian Sturm (2002), reading can promote healing and growth in multiple ways, including traditional IICG bibliotherapy (identification, insight, catharsis, and growth), escapism, and reframing one's own issues by reading about experiences worse than what the reader is experiencing (pp. 175-176).

Claire, who described herself as a "child of divorce" benefitted from reading about characters who had experienced disruption in their own families. She said that it's important for characters to "have their own struggles… It's kind of like I'm not the only person with struggles if I'm reading and they have struggles as well." She was also using creative writing as a means of processing emotion—she was writing her own version of W. Bruce Cameron's *A Dog's Purpose* with "some more war-like things." "It's going to be more difficult and it's not going to be all happy and cheery," she said. "Because that's not me."

Both Billy Bob Joe and Melody described how books about war often provided cathartic emotional release, with both of them telling stories of crying in public:

> I cried both times I read [*Projekt 1065* by Alan Gratz]. Once at school. I just started crying. I don't remember who was next to me, but someone was next to me and was like, "Are you OK?" I'm like, "I'm fine. It's a book" (Melody).

Billy Bob Joe had found particular benefit from a book about a transgender boy who "started out as a girl and then… found out that he was more of a guy and he kind of slowly… realized that people started accepting him." In identifying with this character, Billy Bob Joe came to an understanding that "you're not really all alone in this, you have people that could kind of understand you like that and you realize there are other people out there that are kind of like you in a way."

Escapism also seemed to play a role in the appeal of these books. As noted previously, contemporary fantasy novels involving war often feature powerful female characters and teams of boys and girls working together with equal status. "In fantasy, those normally perceived as unimportant are vital players," writes Tamora Pierce (1993). "Fantasy creates hope and optimism in readers. It is the pure stuff of wonder, the kind that carries over into everyday life and colors the way readers perceive things around them."

Claire described the way that the happy ending promised by genre novels created a safe space in which to vicariously experience the challenges experienced by the characters:

> It's kind of like you know everything's going to end correctly and you don't have to worry about it continuing throughout always. Because, you know, in the books it's kind of the formula that the good wins against evil and you have faith in that and even though bad things are happening, you're not physically going through it.

> You're mentally going through it, but you're not physically going through it. And that helps a lot.

The tragic situations portrayed in war books also seemed to play a role in helping readers to explore and manage their own emotions. Melody described the appeal of reading stories that provoked anger, possibly providing an outlet for anger she felt about injustices experienced or witnessed in her own life:

> To be honest, I honestly hate World War II. I hate the Germans… I hate the Nazis, not the Germans, the Nazis. And Hitler. I want to take a pencil and jab it through his eye [laughs]… I'm an angel. I guess I just like having a reason to be mad at them. Even though most of these are fictional, it's still a reason to be mad at them. It just gives me more reasons to be mad at them.

The hardships and difficulties experienced by the characters may also have helped her to feel that the problems in her own life were more manageable. She described one book both she and a friend had stopped reading halfway through because "we both just thought it was really depressing":

> It was about this guy who was 16, no 14, I don't remember exactly what age he was, but he was young when he went into a concentration camp. And then he goes through like 10 years and six different concentration camps. It was so depressing.

Melody identified herself as "a very happy, positive person" and said that "teachers might be a little weirded out [by the books I read]… like, 'Really? She's such a happy person. Why would she want to read about such horrible things?'" The resilience exhibited by the characters in these books may have been a factor in their appeal.

By comparison, although she enjoyed reading books in which characters survived (or failed to survive) desperate circumstances in World War II, she refused to read angst-driven realistic fiction about middle school issues:

> That kind of stuff [is] just kind of like awkward, having a tough time getting through school, and that just depresses… I don't want to be reading that. I don't like reading stuff about people who are like, "Oooh, oooh."

The happy endings typically seen in middle grade historical fiction also seemed to be an important component of the appeal of difficult stories. As Claire pointed out, "They never kill off a main character." Melody had eventually returned to the book that she and her friend had been reading, and named its ending as one of her favorite scenes:

> [But] at the end, he had made it through the war. And then the Americans came in and saved everybody. And they got to eat a big feast. It was kind of funny because everyone was just waiting for someone to eat and it was like, "You can eat you know." Just like, "You can?" And they all started devouring the food. They were really just kind of like, "This is our food? I don't think it was meant for us, was it?" And they were like, "This is your food. You can eat, you know." And they were like, "We can???" And they just started devouring it.

Connecting to Men

A final pattern that emerged from the interviews was that books about war often played a role in helping the participants forge connections with the men in their lives.

Billy Bob Joe said that their dad was planning to take them to a movie involving war because their mom "doesn't agree with half the stuff that goes on." Melody described how her father showed her an old cartoon on YouTube in which Daffy Duck had "a little Hitler mustache at the end of his beak… It was like making fun of Hitler. I was like, 'Nice job.'"

Claire said, "My family is kind of like a bunch of history buffs—on my dad's side at least—and so we're all for learning about war and stuff." She described how her dad had taken her to a Civil War reenactment by train, and how "he's always teaching us more stuff."

Claire also credited her brothers for influencing her reading interests, saying that she was "raised watching Power Rangers" and that growing up with boys "…really helps you to see into their eyes." She suspected that without boys in the house, she probably

would have grown to prefer more feminine topics. She said that the adults probably would have put more girl-oriented TV shows on for her to watch, “and then I would have started liking that because it’s all I would have been seeing. And I couldn’t work the remote.”

CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis of these interviews revealed a variety of factors that appeal to middle grade children who identify as girls who read about war. In addition to traditional reading appeal factors in the areas of storyline, writing style, pacing, characterization, and tone, themes emerged regarding the role of war as a subject, cultural attitudes and experiences in reading across gender boundaries, and ways in which books about war have supported these readers in the areas of personal growth and connection to men in their lives.

Although a small exploratory study such as this does not produce generalizable results, readers' advisory and youth librarians can use knowledge gained from this research to recommend books to readers with similar interest profiles. In addition to providing these children with read-alike titles similar to their current favorites, the traditional reading appeal factors enjoyed by these participants suggest that they may also be interested in exploring adrenaline-fueled genres in general, including action-adventure, suspense, and thriller novels. Historical fiction readers would likely be well-matched with books that feature historical settings, courageous protagonists, or moving content regardless of whether they include war, and fantasy readers in particular may enjoy trying science fiction, horror, or paranormal.

The discussion of gender revealed ongoing issues surrounding cultural attitudes about "girl books" and "boy books" as well as more gender concerns involving gender-

based power dynamics. Librarians can work to normalize reading across gender boundaries, taking action such as using neutral book covers to mask gendered images, book-talking gender-oriented books with strong crossover appeal, and creating youth advisory boards to address this issue.

Finally, the ways in which these books seemed to promote healing and growth can be used to guide librarians in supporting the emotional and developmental needs of their young patrons through the power of story. Collections development decisions can be guided by a recognition of the importance of providing children with protagonists with whom they identify, particularly those from groups traditionally underrepresented in middle grade literature. Additionally, librarians who understand the potential healing value of war narratives that involve difficult material may recommend these books to children who have not yet expressed an interest in this topic area.

Perhaps more than anything, the voices of these readers can help librarians and other youth advocates to better understand some of the perspectives, experiences, and enthusiasms shared by children who read across traditional gender boundaries. By listening with careful attention to the children we serve, we can respond to their varied and changing needs as they navigate these crucial developmental years.

REFERENCES

Adams, C. F. (1877). The public library and the public schools. *Library Journal, 1*. 437-441.

Aliaga-Buchenau, A. A. (2004). *The "dangerous" potential of reading: Readers and the negotiation of power in nineteenth-century narratives.* London: Routledge.

Alcott, L. M. (1869). *Little women, or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy.* Boston: Roberts Brothers.

American Library Association (1882). The ALA Co-operation Committee's report on exclusion. *Library Journal, 7*. 28-29.

American Library Association (1996). *Library Bill of Rights*. Retrieved April 14, 2017, from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill

An American Lady (1833). *Sketches of the lives of distinguished females, written for girls, with a view to their mental and moral improvement.* New York: J & J Harper.

Ashley, L. F. (1970). Children's reading interests and individualized reading. *Elementary English, 47*. 1088-1096.

Bean, Mary A. (1883). Report on the reading of the young. *Library Journal, 8*. 217-227.

Beardsley, I. L. (1882). Fiction in libraries. *Library Journal, 7.* 175-176.

Belloni, L. F. & Jongsma, E. A. (1978). The effects of interest on reading comprehension of low-achieving students. *Journal of Reading, 22*(2). 106-109.

Boston Herald (1881). Books for boys and girls. *Library Journal, 6.* 182.

Brett, W. H. (1885). Books for youth. *Library Journal, 10.* 127-128.

Brookline Public Library (1908). *Something to read, for boys and girls*. [Brookline, Mass.]: Brookline Public Library.

Bullock, R. W. (1897). Some observations on children's reading. *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting.* Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1015-1021.

Burnard, P., Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Analysing and presenting qualitative data. *British Dental Journal*, *204*(8). 429–432. https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.292

Cannons, H. G. T. (1910). *Bibliography of library economy; a classified index to the professional periodical literature relating to library economy, printing, methods of publishing, copyright, bibliography, etc.* London: Stanley Russell & Co.

Chamberlain, M. (1883). Report on fiction in public libraries. *Library Journal, 8*. 208-210.

Clark, C. & Foster, A. (2005). Children's and young people's reading. London: National Literacy Trust.

Cowell, P. (1877). On the admission of fiction in free public libraries. *Library Journal, 2.* 152-159.

Donelson, K. (1985). *American writers for children before 1900.* Detroit, MI: Gale Research Co.

Dunn, F. W. (1921). *Interest factors in primary reading material*. New York City, NY: Teachers' College, Columbia University.

Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication.* New York: New York University Press. Retrieved February 16, 2017, from http://nyu.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.18574/nyu/9780814732939.001.0001/upso-9780814732939-chapter-003. DOI: 10.18574/nyu/9780814732939.001.0001.

Grace Harlowe. (2016, November 9). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved April 9, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Grace_Harlowe&oldid=748651347

Green, S. (1877). The proceedings. *American Library Journal, 1*. 92-145.

Greenwood, J.M. (1883). What the school-children read. *Library Journal, 8*. 49-50.

Hall, C., & Coles, M. (2002). *Children's reading choices.* London: Routledge.

Hartford Courant (1883). Newspapers. *Library Journal, 8*. 85.

Hewens, C. M. (1882). Annual report on boys' and girls' reading. *Library Journal, 7*. 182-190.

Hewens, C. M. (Ed.) (1883). Literature for the young. *Library Journal, 8*. 56-58.

Hopkins, S. (2002). Girl heroes: the new force in popular culture. Annandale, N.S.W.: Pluto Press.

Hubbard, J. M. (1881). Novels and story-books: A letter to the superintendent of public schools. *Library Journal, 6.* 45-47.

Jordan, A. M. (1926). *Children's interest in reading.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Krischer, H. (2017, July 12). Everyday sexism in a 'post-feminist' world. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/everyday-sexism-in-a-post-feminist-world/533241/

Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Lahman, M. K. E., Rodriguez, K. L., Moses, L., Griffin, K. M., Mendoza, B. M., & Yacoub, W. (2015). A Rose by Any Other Name Is Still a Rose? Problematizing Pseudonyms in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 21*(5). 445–453. doi: 10.1177/1077800415572391

Lazar, M. (1937). *Reading interests, activities and opportunities of bright, average and dull children.* New York City, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Lukoff, K. (2013). Taking gender out of reader's advisory. *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA), 36*(1). 632-633.

Marsh, S. (2016, March 23). The gender-fluid generation: Young people on being male, female or non-binary. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/23/gender-fluid-generation-young-people-male-female-trans

McCarty, P. (1950). Reading interests shown by choices of books in school libraries. *The School Review, 58*(2). 90-96.

Mooney, S. (2014). *Qualitative interviewing with vulnerable populations: Ethical considerations when conducting narrative interviews with young people with cancer.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9781446273050135091 84

Norvell, G. W. (1973). *The reading interests of young people*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

NoveList. (2017). *The secret language of books: A guide to appeal*. Durham, NC: EBSCO.

Ooi, K., & Liew, C. L. (2011). Selecting fiction as part of everyday life information seeking. *Journal of Documentation, 67(*5). 748-772. doi:10.1108/00220411111164655

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Percy, T. (1884). *The boy's Percy: Old ballads of war, adventure and love from Bishop Thomas Percy's Reliques of ancient English poetry.'* New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Pierce, T. (1993, October). Fantasy: Why kids read it, why kids need it. *School Library Journal, 39*. 50-51.

Posey, L. (2016) Gender. *Critical Quarterly, 58*(3). 94–96. doi: 10.1111/criq.12293.

Providence (R. I.) P. L. (1882). Abstracts of an extracts from reports. *Library Journal, 7.* p. 89.

Rossman, G., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Ruth Fielding Series (2017). Goodreads. Retrieved April 9, 2017, from http://www.goodreads.com/series/44042-ruth-fielding

Safdar, S., & Kosakowska-Berezecka, N. (2015) *Psychology of gender through the lens of culture: Theories and applications*. New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media.

Saricks, J. (2005). *Readers' advisory service in the public library (3rd ed.)*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Smith, F. O. (1907). Pupils' voluntary reading. *The Pedagogical Seminary, 14.* Worcester, Mass.: J.H. Orpha, 208-222.

Stauffer, S. (2007). Developing children's interest in reading. *Library Trends, 56*(2). 402-422.

Stories for girls. (1883). *Library Journal, 7*(8). 152.

Sturm, B. (2003). Reader's advisory and bibliotherapy: helping or healing? *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences, 41*(2). 171-179.

Thorndike, R. L. (1941). *A comparative study of children's reading interests: Based on a fictitious annotated titles questionnaire.* New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Thorndike, R. L., & Henry, F. (1940). Differences in reading interests related to differences in sex and intelligence level. *The Elementary School Journal, 40*(10). 751–763.

Tibbetts, S. L. (1974). Sex differences in children's reading preferences. *The Reading Teacher, 28*(3). 279-281.

Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science.* Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject: Seeking Girls Who Read About War -- Help Librarians Better Understand Young Readers

Hi!

My name is Jennifer O'Bryan, and I'm a graduate student working under the supervision of Brian Sturm, Ph.D., in the UNC School of Information and Library Science. For my master's paper, I'm researching reading appeal factors among girls aged 10 to 14 who enjoy reading about war. The research generated by this study will help librarians provide better book recommendations to tween readers.

Participants will be asked a series of questions relating to their interest in books about war. Interviews will take approximately 45 minutes to complete and will be held in a private area at a library convenient to the participant. In order to maintain confidentiality, digital voice recordings will not include names or other identifying information (with the exception of the speaker's voice). All data will be password-protected, and pseudonyms will be used in the written paper. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Kids may benefit from participating in this study through increased self-awareness, empowerment, and a stronger sense of identity as a reader. Additionally, this research will help librarians provide more gender-neutral readers' advisory that challenges outdated stereotypes and provides better support for youth of all gender identities and expressions.

If you know of a child who would be interested in being interviewed for this study, please contact me at girlsread@unc.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Jennifer O'Bryan

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

General Questions

- What do you remember about the first book you read about war?
- Can you tell me about war books you've read since then and how you found them?
- Can you describe some of your favorite scenes from war books?
- Why would you say you like to read books about war?
- What words would you use to describe the books you like?
- Do you also like TV or movies about war? What are your favorites?
- How old do you think kids should be to read books like these? Do you think everyone in your grade should be allowed to read these books, or just some kids?
- What are your favorite books or authors – not just war books, but any kind?
- Do you think there's a difference between books written by men and women? Do you prefer one or the other?
- Are there any books you enjoy that you wouldn't want other kids to see you reading?
- How do your parents feel about the fact that you like reading about war?
- Do you think your parents or teachers would be surprised if they knew some of the things that are in the books you read? What would they think?
- Do you think things are fair for girls in the books you like to read?
- Do you think there's such a thing as "boy books" and "girl books"?
    - Can you describe them? Which kind do you like better?
    - Do you think it's OK for girls to read "boy books"? Boys to read "girl books"?
- Do you have to be in a certain mood to read about war? If so, can you describe it?
- How do you feel about war in general?
- Do you ever talk to librarians to figure out what to read? Can you tell me about a time that a librarian was helpful?

Pacing

- Do you like it when books get straight to the action or do you want to find out what's happening more slowly?
- Do you want books where characters talk a lot or do you want more description about the world?
- How much of the time when you're reading do you want to be turning pages because you need to know what happens next, and how much do you like things to be more calm? Do you like it to go back and forth between the two, or just be all one way?

Characterization

- What kinds of main characters do you like to read about? (Prompt to determine the extent to which gender, age, race/ethnicity, values, and personality play a role.)
- What about the other characters?
- Do you like to imagine that you're the main character when you're reading? If so, do you care if the character is a boy or a girl?
- How important are the characters to you versus the storyline?

Storyline

- Do you like the story to focus on what the main character is thinking or more on the action that's happening?
- Do you like stories that are more about how people are dealing with the war or more about the historical events that happened?

Frame

- Do you like books about war that tell you a lot about what it was like during the war, or do you want more focus on the characters?
- How would you describe the overall feeling of the books you read about war?